

Biologists give attention to rare mountain bogs

Three mountain bogs managed by the state parks system are among the most rare and most fragile ecosystems anywhere in the U.S. Though they are home to some very rare species, not much is known about exactly how these small, high-elevation wetlands work.

So, naturalists with the state parks system, through the collaborative Bog Learning Network, are taking a very methodical approach to managing the bogs – and getting impressive early results.

The group adopted a “no regrets” philosophy to take cautious action to improve the habitats. “You take some judicious management actions and then wait to see if they work. If so, you move ahead. If not, then you reconsider,” said western region biologist Marshall Ellis.

At Pineola Bog in Avery County, that meant removing much of the alder, a woody plant that seemed to be shading out some of the more fragile plants. It was simple but pretty laborious work by biologists and the staff from Elk Knob State Park in Watauga County.

They chose a portion of the 91-acre bog that once had been altered by gravel mining. The difference was startling. More varied plant life sprang from the spongy soil, including an abundance of fringed phacelia blossoms that had not been seen before. Ellis said the next step is to expand the alder thinning effort into other management zones.



Friends of State Parks promotes grant program

In coming months, state parks will be dreaming up creative ways to use grants available from the statewide Friends of State Parks (FSP). A combination of additional funding for the grant program and tighter budgets for the state parks system have made the FSP grants more valuable than ever.

State parks and recreation areas are eligible for the modest, one-time grants that improve the state parks experience in some surprising ways. An FSP grant augmented by funds from the Eno River Association allowed Eno River State Park to add a lifelike display of a coyote. FSP funds will match those raised by local friends groups for annual festivals at Crowders Mountain and Hammocks Beach state parks. Morrow Mountain State Park will rebuild a dry-stacked stone wall at the entrance.

AmeriCorps member aids river protection

(Submitted by Abby Van de Bogert, AmeriCorps program director in the N.C. Office of Environmental Education and Public Affairs.)

Darius Pollard, is one of several AmeriCorps members serving at North Carolina state parks this summer and clearly embodies the organization’s pledge to “get things done.”

The park regularly monitors riparian conservation easements along the waterway’s south fork, designated a national Wild and Scenic River. These easements serve as riparian buffers that help maintain water quality.

Continued Other Side



NC DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION
NC DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES



The park had found some properties had been clear-cut and mowed, reducing the buffers' effectiveness. Pollard developed a campaign to reach out to these landowners, writing letters to those whose easements were in need of restoration.

Through a partnership with the nonprofit National Committee for the New River, Pollard arranged for funding to share the cost of restoration with the landowners. Pollard now meets regularly with the organization's restoration director to review property conditions and create land management plans and cost estimates for landowners.

Dogs lead scientific box turtle hunts

Jenny Ren and Mink thrashed through the underbrush at Eno River State Park recently with singular determination. Mink returned, carefully carrying a box turtle in his jaws and obviously pleased with himself and dropped it at the feet of John Rucker.

The two Boykin spaniels are from a pack of 10 that Rucker has trained to find box turtles. Rucker brought the dogs from his Greensboro home to a reptile and amphibian program at the park and they were the stars of the event.

Bird hunting with one of the spaniels years ago, Rucker discovered that they have a natural talent for finding the reclusive turtles and could be easily trained using scented, fiberglass turtle shells.

For biologists, it's more than sport. Populations of the eastern box turtle are declining everywhere and no one is sure why, although loss of habitat likely figures into it.

In many eastern and midwestern states, including North Carolina, box turtle studies have begun in earnest. Outdoor lovers have been invited to get involved in "citizen science" projects by reporting box turtle encounters.

At Eno River, a box turtle study was launched by the Eno River Association. On Saturday, naturalist Kat Walston was on hand to measure, weigh and mark the turtles found by the spaniels as part of that effort.

Rucker has carried his dogs as far afield as Wisconsin, where a similar decline in ornate box turtles has researchers worried. In Illinois, the dogs have tracked turtles that are battling a mysterious virus, and in Tennessee, they've helped study how well box turtles can survive heavy logging operations.

A keen observer can learn much from the success – or failure – of a turtle hunt, Rucker told the park visitors. "You have to learn how turtles behave in order to learn how to protect them."



NEW RIVER JUNIOR RANGERS

NEW RIVER STATE PARK HELD ITS FIRST-EVER JUNIOR RANGER CAMP IN JUNE. FOUR DAYS OF EXPLORING NATURE AND THE PARK'S HISTORY RESULTED IN 12 FRESHLY MINTED JUNIOR RANGERS. THE PARK WILL BE HOLDING TWO MORE CAMPS THIS SUMMER.



The Steward is an e-newsletter of the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. To learn how to subscribe to the complete version and have news of the North Carolina state parks sent directly to your email inbox, scan the QR code here with a smartphone app or visit www.ncparks.gov, and click "News."

